

**A New Harvest of Anger:
Reading Pakistan's Society as Alternative Narrative in Contemporary Urdu
Literature**

**Asif FARRUKHI
(Habib University, Pakistan)**

1.

I will refer to a short fiction first and then describe the ground I hope to cover in this paper. Let me begin by a story with a task-conscious protagonist with heaps of dead bodies all around. Pilfering with the bodies of the dead piled up in a special chamber, a scavenger describes his main task as liquidating memories of the dead, obliterating all personal information. He prides himself on large scale tempering with records, that is history on a large scale, reducing to unsalvageable information junk while proclaiming himself to be a chronicler. The substance of what is ignored by the *Waq'a'i Nigar*, or the Chronicler as he calls himself, finds a repository for itself in contemporary Urdu literature from Pakistan.

Taking the cue from the short fiction of Asad Muhammad Khan, the paper signposts that a clearly demarcated chronicle of trends in Pakistan's society emerges from its literary expression, providing an alternative narrative from a country with diverse reality, inherent contradictions and unique literary expression. It argues that a significant body of work gives voice to experiences missed out in the dominant narrative.

This paper will go on to outline the major themes and patterns emerging from contemporary Urdu literature as it bears witness to shaping events in Pakistan's tumultuous history, and rapid socio-political developments. Ranging from the continuing influence of classical traditions to modernistic influences from the West to post-modernism and recent theoretical advances, various authors have grappled in their own way with accelerated social changes, political instability, religious extremism, sense of despair and aimlessness in youth, suppression of women's rights and sense of isolation in minorities. I will not go into the

details of these well-documented phenomena and do not want to identify parallel literary instances, but instead argue about the overall value of this body of work through representative samples. Significant in itself, this body of work is often conspicuous in its absence from national academic syllabi and generally ignored in socio-political analysis about Pakistan, thus leading to a limited understanding of Pakistan's society. I will focus to a large extent on two contemporary writers of short fiction, move on to the novel and then go on to poetry. I will highlight representative examples from these writers who are less known to international audience and deserve to be better known through the medium of translations in order to deepen and enrich understanding of the dynamics in Pakistan's society.

The context of my argument and the gist of the paper originate from a train of thought and associations set in motion in my mind from reading and contemplating diverse short fictions of Asad Muhammad Khan. A major contemporary writer in the Urdu language from Pakistan, he is an influential figure, generally acknowledged as among those who shape the prevalent literary discourse. The title of my paper A New Harvest of Anger is a tribute to his writing. This title seems apt and applicable in the current context as I present a broad overview of the contemporary Urdu scene.

In order to do so, I will begin with a story. The Urdu original bears the title *Ghussay Ki Nai Fasl* and the author named one of his books after the story¹. This also served, with the omission of the word "new" as the title of a volume of selected short fiction translated into English².

The story captioned with this phrase apparently has little or no relevance to the current theme, as it is set in another time and place. It is set in the era of Sher Shah Suri, the late fifteenth century ruler of Delhi, but as its historical reference is a deception or fiction of convenience, it could have been set anywhere. A visitor to the abode of the king comes across weird and terrifying noises coming from night-time quarters and discovers a group of men howling at the top of their lungs but sitting across each other without lifting a finger:

¹ Asad Muhammad Khan, *Ghussay Ki Nai Fasl* (Lahore: Ilqa Publications, 2013)

² Asad Muhammad Khan, *The Harvest of Anger*, trans. Aquila Ismail (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2002)

“The roof had been illuminated with many lamps, torches, *diyas* and *shamas*. It seemed almost as if it was daytime. Forty or fifty men and women were sitting in a circle emitting strange sounds of rage and anger. At times, it seemed as though they might get up and tear each other apart. But in spite of the rage and the fury no one moved from his place or attacked anyone. They were only intimidating the person in front of them with angry noises, glaring at them with wide-open eyes and gnashing their teeth.”³

A fascinating image, but it makes one wonder as to what else it could imply. Could this be a tongue-in-cheek precursor of the modern phenomenon of the literary conference in this modern day and age? Could it be a symbolic description of the coming together of writers and poets, who can do nothing else in view of each other except grimace and gnash their teeth? The story of course offers no neat explanation. It is this capacity to raise terrifying and unanswered questions which set my imagination working. Is it pointing to repressed emotions? Is it calling for a cathartic relief from demonstrations of anger? Does it point out to a possibility devoid from our present society? There is no clear or straight answer. You are free to draw your own conclusions.

Dazed by these questions, here I will speak of another short fiction at some length, called *Waqai Nigar* in the volume bearing the name of the story I have already referred to⁴. A realistic account of a young man whose enthusiasm for films from across the border makes him take a risk. After a long and meandering course, almost episodic to the point of being picaresque, the story comes to a critical situation as the actual work being carried out by the protagonist is described.

The mortuary seems particularly interesting to the author apparently, as he has set another remarkable story in this unlikely setting. This is *Murda Ghar Main Mukashfa*⁵, translated into English as *Apocalypse in the Morgue*⁶ and is woven around the protagonist who is at

³ Khan, Ghussay Ki Nai Fasl, pp 4-17

⁴ Asad Muhammad Khan, “Waqai Nigar” in Ghussay Ki Nai Fasl, pp 59

⁵ Asad Muhammad Khan, “Murda Ghar Main Mukashfa” in Burj e Khamoshan (Karachi, 1990)

⁶ Asad Muhammad Khan, “A Revelation in the House of the Dead”, trans. Yudullah Ijtehadi in Fires in an

home inside the morgue to the extent of being able to play around with dead bodies. Once the reader has adjusted to this unsettling location, there comes the unspeakable gesture on behalf of the protagonist.

The gesture is horrifying by itself. However here defilement is part of a larger and more complex meaning. To come back to this story, as it moves on:

“He told me that after spraying the bodies with chemicals each one is placed in a plastic vat. Then another vat, which is actually the lid of the first, is placed over that and made airtight, etc., Then the process of obliteration begins. Every trace of the corpse – its name, address, and period, its opinions and ideas, its ideology, the poems written for it, the processions taken out for it ---- everything begins to liquidate. Even outside the morgue no one utters its name out loud. “All the records of the corpse are thoroughly mixed with a huge quantity of irrelevant information in such a way that no one can salvage them. Then everything is forgotten and ignored and nothing is denied because denial is a form of acceptance.”⁷”

Denuding what were once people of any individual attribution, it becomes easy to what the story terms as liquidation. The fiction becomes allocation of defiance as it preserves a moment of dissent. Irrelevant information sweeps in to erode any remnants and bury everybody, but it is the fiction which provides the alternative space in which the dehumanizing act can be recorded and protested. This possibility of an alternative space seems to me to be an essential gesture here, showing what fiction can do and is doing in a society such as Pakistan by preserving the human face of people who can be lost in numbers. Sometimes brutally reduced to a faceless pulp on the international media, it is fiction which maintains a record of these individuals.

Acclaimed and well-known in literary circles, Asad Muhammad Khan cannot be described as a popular success at home and similarly he is not as well known outside the home ground.

Autumn Garden, ed. Asif Farrukhi (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp 232- 240

⁷ Hasan Manzar, “Zameen Ka Nauha”. Rehai. Hyderabad, 1981

His powerful vision and off-beat expression deserve to be better known, for their own inherent qualities as well as powerful renderings of Pakistan's society as lived experience.

As different as two writers can be who live in the same period and cover a more or less similar terrain of experience, Hasan Manzar is, like Asad Muhammad Khan, best known for his short fiction even though unlike the latter, he has penned six novels during a literary career spanning many decades. This number is itself unusual in a literary setting where writers face many difficulties in taking up the longer narrative.

Perhaps the most original, certainly the most dramatic short fiction by Manzar is *Zameen Ka Nauha*, translated as *Requiem for the Earth*.⁸ As befitting the author's approach of avoiding direct comment and focusing on small details instead, the short story opens with a changed trend in the matrimonial advertisements published in newspapers as indicative of a bigger issue of women gradually decreasing in numbers from the face of earth to the point of becoming endangered. This is shocking by itself but the story goes on to describe the developing scale of the problem as how matrimonial advertisements cross national preferences and the need becomes global. The impending doom takes the form of an advertisement in which the mounting desperation is subdued:

“White citizen, belonging to South Africa, age about 45, connected by birth to the Dutch Reformed Church, well-off, wants to marry. The girl need not belong to any particular race or religion.”⁹

The crisis looming in the background of such advertisements is commented upon in a deliberately nonchalant manner by the author: “It looks as if the world was facing a serious shortage of women.” It is later that the full impact of such a situation becomes apparent. As the improbable but highly plausible story given its context moves on, the world is searching

⁸ Hasan Manzar, “Requiem for the Earth”, trans. M. Salim ur Rahman in Farrukhi, *Fires in an Autumn Garden*, 353- 367

⁹ Ibid., pp 354

desperately for its lost women. The staff of an international organization called Save Mankind surprised by a letter alerting them to the sighting of a woman:

“In a nearby village I have seen on a number of occasions a woman walking towards a hill, accompanying by her husband. He is a former schoolmaster and now herds sheep but spends most of his time looking after his wife. Both their young sons died suddenly of a blood disease. I know where the woman lives.”¹⁰

The closing sentence of the letter has a dramatic effect but the expedition it leads to not unexpected resistance from the old man, her husband. He refuses to acknowledge their concern for the survival of mankind by telling them off. As the last surviving woman's condition worsens, the world watches with bated breath and the staff in the communication satellite hold the wondrous new medicine in their hands. Ultimately, they will find a purpose for this medicine as the capsules are placed inside a rocket going off into outer space. Oblivious to the noise around him, the old man prepares to put his dead wife's body inside the earth, saying to himself:

“Dear earth, how good you still are and so beautiful. You are so beautiful that I am ready today to yield to you my most precious possession, one which I denied to your enemies.”¹¹

The stark situation of the story strikes one as something of a shock but the immediate context is not made apparent immediately, in spite of the old man's outburst against the so-called rescuers. Outside the frame of the text, however, the author has commented upon this story and it may be useful here to refer to it in order to get a better understanding of this complex and nuanced story. In an essay written a few years later¹², the story comes up for

¹⁰ Ibid., pp 363

¹¹ Ibid., pp 367

¹² Hasan Manzar quoted in Farrukhi, *Fires in an Autumn Garden*, pp 352

discussion between two voices, one of which is the author and the other a physician friend who turns out to be his other self. The author has to say to his imaginary counterpart:

“The story has been shown to me in many colours, just as in the days of black and white films the projector-man in some movie houses would change slides to please the public and show different colours on the screen and without the creator’s knowledge, the whole scene would suddenly be pink or turn blue or green, as in the silky *shalwars* and shirts of women wearing a lot of make-up. Yet in my mind, the requiem for the earth was a requiem without colours, in which only the tiny flowers growing besides some lake were colourful and these too were blooming only to be crushed under military boots.

“For some people this story was doomsday literature --- a chronicle of the end of the earth, some took it for science fiction ----”¹³

An English translation of this was story was included in an anthology of short fiction offering insights into the “state of the nation,” which I edited. Referring to this dialogue in the introductory note I wrote for the author, I made the observation:

“Open to several possibilities of interpretation, the story has its origins in the author’s perceptions about environmental degradation and the status of women in Pakistan ---- “one step forwards, two steps backwards” is the title of a study of the setbacks to this status. In the form of a history of the future, the story presents a recurrent and persistent pattern in Pakistan’s history, taking it to its logical conclusion.”¹⁴

My argument in the current context would be that the story offers a dramatic reading of the situation of women in Pakistan and the ecological challenges faced by the country. By no means limited to such representation, it is also a work of imaginative art in the best possible

¹³ Hasan Manzar quoted in Farrukhi, *Fires in an Autumn Garden*, pp 353

¹⁴ Farrukhi, *Fires in an Autumn Garden*, pp 352

sense of the terms. The unique insight it offers can complement social analysis in an illuminating manner.

The bulk of Manzar's work consists of short stories, remarkable for their veracity. His themes and perspective are ever expanding while the locale keeps changing. Faruq Hassan, himself a notable translator and writer, defines an essential feature of Manzar's writing when he describes it as signifying an expansion of one's views, a journey from the familiar to realms unknown:

“To read him is to undertake a voyage beyond one's customary and geographical limits. It is to participate in an experience of “deep human sympathy” which transcends political and national boundaries.”¹⁵

This is also borne out by new writings which display the writer's power and range, and one such story is *Na Shukray*, recently translated into English¹⁶. The location is not specified and offers no direct explanation of why the ingrates are described as such. As a narrative act, the story tends to gain from such direct commentary which have made it more journalistic. However, it leaves no holds barred for depicting the plight of the individual in the context of a brutalized society.

2.

For its point of departure, this paper began with the short story as this is the dominant form in Urdu literature from Pakistan. Paradoxically, the novel comes next, as good works of a literary quality make an appearance after some intervals. This is in contrast to the global situation where the novel is recognized to be the dominant literary form and through which any country's literature is known abroad. As a genre the inherent value the novel holds is too well-known for any reiteration here, but I will refer to a very perceptive comment made by Orhan Pamuk, and although he mentions India and China by name, it is allocable to Pakistan

¹⁵ Faruq Hassan quoted in Farrukhi, *Fires in an Autumn Garden*, pp 351

¹⁶ Hasan Manzar, “The Ingrate”, trans. Imtiaz Paracha, *Critical Muslim* 24, October-December 2017

as well. “In recent years,” according to Pamuk, “we have witnessed the astounding economic rise of India and China, and in both these countries the rapid expansion of the middle class, though I do not think we shall truly understand the people who have been part of this transformation until we have seen their private lives reflected in novels.”¹⁷ My underlying assumption here is reinforced through Pamuk that it is through novels that one can develop a sensitive and nuanced understanding of social transformation, which affects people’s lives.

Such an understanding would be deficient without an appreciation of novels emerging from this society. However, there is another way in which such analyses can be incomplete, and that is by ignoring the fact that the major vehicle for Pakistan’s literary expression is Urdu. On the international front, the situation is compounded by the fact that a handful of English-language novels have attracted attention far and wide. My argument is that these novels are recognized to be “the novels from Pakistan” which readers outside the country are likely to know, instead of the novels written in Urdu and indigenous languages and as such unable to access large global audiences. This goes beyond monopoly of market to large issues of representation, and for this purpose I will refer to the study *Where Worlds Collide* by the respectable French academician and scholar David Waterman¹⁸. The book bears the subtitle *Pakistani fiction in the New Millennium*. The book begins with an Introduction introducing Pakistan as a very young and a very old nation in its cultural heritage. The Introduction comes to its conclusion with remarkable flourish with the following words:

“Ultimately, this is perhaps the biggest contribution made by Pakistani writers taking history with a capital “H” into account, linking it to the everyday, and daring to imagine a Pakistan whose story is not yet finished.”

¹⁷ Orhan Pamuk, *Other Colours: Essays and A Story* (New York: Knopf, 2007)

¹⁸ David Waterman, *Where Worlds Collide: Pakistani Fiction in the New Millennium* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2015)

There is no quarrel with the contribution or its recognition of the achievements of Pakistani writers, but then as one gets into the main body of the book one realizes that it is completely confined to the small group of English language writers. Not only is there no discussion of any of the local writers, there is no mention of the fact that such a body of works exists, that it does serve some purpose and may have even exerted some influence on the English language writers, who are themselves not repelled but strengthened by local associations. It is beyond the scope of this paper to draw any sort of comparison between these two vastly different bodies of work, and also this would be un-necessary. I would like to present the literary and representational qualities of some novels written in Urdu and focus on what they have to offer. I would have liked to take a panoramic view of the range of publications and contextualize them, specially in terms of the insights they offer, but also the problems and hardships these writers face in reaching out to wider audiences. However, this is the subject of another paper for the future and here I will only touch upon two or three names.

A fiction writer who has not attracted the kind of wider readership he deserved is Ikramullah. The author of a number of collections of short stories, his best work is the early novel of his career, *Gurg-e-Shab*. However, the novel was banned upon its first publication. An intensive study of the breakdown of relationships, it earned the ire of the censor authorities for depicting an incestuous relationship between two of the main characters. He is at his best in longer tales such as *Aankh Ojhal*, set in the Punjab still reeling from the violent riots around the Partition but a new rift begins to set in as the Ahmadi community finds itself subjected to discrimination and mob-attacks. In the finely crafted novel, the author has touched upon a sensitive theme, hardly been taken up by other writer from Pakistan. While Pakistan's track record in dealing with religious or ethnic minorities is subject to censure in international for a, what is known is the brave and dissenting voice of the writer who dares to speak about all such injustices.

In this part of the paper, I would like to describe briefly the novels of Mirza Athar Baig, one of the most unique figure among Urdu fiction-writers today. Baig has published a collection of short stories and authored several plays for the television, he has excelled primarily in the novel. His first novel *Ghulam Bagh* was widely commented upon while

Cypher Say Aik Tak an unusual medley of narrative styles and techniques. In this novel one can read an entire map of the various possibilities of contemporary narrative in Urdu. His third novel, *Hasan Ki Soorat e Haal* continues his relentless experimentation and innovation to express contemporary reality, and I will dwell upon some of its features briefly.

In the novel's very first sentence, Hasan Raza Zaheer is described as encountering something after a lifetime of *uchat-ti hui manzar-beeni*, a lifetime of skimming over the surface of things, which could well be the author's diagnosis of what ails contemporary Urdu fiction¹⁹. Avoiding this superficiality, the novel makes an attempt to go deeper and deeper into the heart of the matter. Its pensive and reflective mood comes out in its unconventional way of narrating even the most seemingly ordinary incidents. All disruptions in the flow glossing over the surface of all scenes and filling up the blank spaces with alternative scenes are enigmatically defined as the "apparently real, personal life" of a character named Hasan Raza Zaheer. The book's textured narrative is enigmatic, and invites the reader to take this journey with and through the book.

As the chapter reaches its conclusion, we learn that Zaheer's story has ended, yet some stories continue in spite of having come to an end. Surprises never cease and we encounter the term *hairania* which could be an amalgamation of narration and wonderment. Is this the best way to describe this novel, one may ask, but the story moves on. This *soorat-e-haal*, or the situation, is "the only possible scenario" and after we encounter a trash-collector, we are informed about the manuscript lost in a heap of garbage, a manuscript which could have changed the fate of the world as its name goes. Surprises do not end and we are invited to distribute sweets in celebration of attaining liberty from the Great Liberator. The choice of the name and its political implications are obvious. The question which confronts us is whether he the dictator who will obtain freedom from the last dictator, who had seized power promising to be the Great Liberator?

As the novel moves on, significant details seize every moment and we seem to be watching a surrealist film. Or is it the making of a film that we are looking at? People come forth and are dissolved as if being shot through a movie camera and narrative styles change from a

¹⁹ Mirza Athar Baig, *Hasan Ki Soorat e Haal* (Lahore: Saanjh, 2014)

reflective, realist mode to that of a screenplay. Some portions do not offer an easy read and make one wish for editorial cuts. While it may be heavy going in some places, the style and narrative techniques are suitable for the innovative approach the novel has adopted. The novel is a Jack in the Box, ready to spring surprises. The swirling, freewheeling storyline takes many twists and turns and often stops in its tracks to reflect upon itself, the narrative force coming out effectively through the language which is unconventional but well-tuned to the novel's spirit.

Commenting upon his first novel, a critic had commented that such writers deserve a wider reading public. Plagued by a limited market at home and little or no access to translations in other languages, these novelists carry their own unique versions of truth, voices which need to be heard. Inventive and bold in taking risks, Mirza Athar Baig is all set to expand the horizons of contemporary Urdu fiction.

3.

From fiction, I move on to poetry, but poetry situated at an angle to the mainstream. Fraught with difficulties in translation, Urdu poetry, from the classical works of Mir and Ghalib to the modern Faiz and Rashid nevertheless has been relatively well served by its translators. For the purpose of the present paper, I will take up the work of poets whose concern as well as expression is more contemporary with a sharp difference from the classical. I will speak specifically of two poets, Azra Abbas and Afzal Ahmed Syed, who share some common characteristics but are very different from each other in their choice of subjects, themes and poetic concerns.

Defying classification, Azra Abbas has maintained a singular identity reflected in her poetic voice. It is distinct and highly personal at the same time. In *An Evening of Caged Beasts*, an anthology I edited in collaboration with Frances Pritchett, I noted the seemingly "prosaic awkwardness" of Abbas' work, commenting that: "Azra Abbas is unconventional, deliberately un-poetical in her choice of themes as well as style of expression. She writes the poetry of life's prose. Her realm is that of the commonplace, the ordinary. She writes about

the hackneyed routines, the dull emptiness and boredom of life. Her deadpan style seems all the more glaring when she writes about her tribulations as a woman.”²⁰

In her later work, she touches upon themes such as violence, civic breakdown and the suffering of the down-trodden but it is remarkable that violence does not become a “subject” in her work but remains unmeshed within the overall thematic framework. In these poems, she sometimes brings in more than one voice, indicating a kind of dialogue but without clear demarcation as to where one speaker transitions into the other. The poems include the following I have translated as A Fear:²¹

A fear

Runs along the railway track

Is entwined

Around a machine's wheel

The ship's crew

Can see it on the surface of the sea

It coils

like the branches of a tree

Around a man walking

It is visible in any eye

at any given time

When it rains for long

²⁰ Asif Farrukhi and Frances Pritchett, *An Evening of Caged Beasts: Seven Post-Modernist Urdu Poets* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1999)

²¹ Asif Farrukhi, “People All Around You: Locating Karachi in the Poetry of Azra Abbas” in *Cityscapes of Violence in Karachi: Publics and Counterpublics*, ed. Nichola Khan (London: Hurst and Company, 2017), pp 35-36

When the sun begins to melt iron
When roofs no longer
 make you think of shadows
A fear gets up from some place
And fills the heart
 with strange premonitions

It is fear
Which snatches away
 bread from the hungry
 water from the sun
 raindrops from the cloud

A fear which enters
From my nostrils
 to the pit of my stomach
And causes
 my death.

From an abstract notion, fear takes on physical attributes. Another poem belonging to the same period is entitled The Final Victory:

A fear
Creeps out of some corner
And begins to dance
In front of my eyes
Like an expert
Showing off his movements

Or telling
a great secret of life and death.

The curtain falls
Nobody knows when
The fear climbs up
and sits on my chest
I scream
In sleep and in waking hours
I keep fighting

Who will win
This war?

With its unanswered questions, the poem leaves us at a poignant point. Contemporary realities determine the poetic expression. The poetry of Afzal Ahmed Syed marks a significant departure from the dominant trends of the day. It can be seen as a beginning, the invention of poetry all over again, as borne out by the remarkable poem, *Shaeri Main Nay Ejad Ki*, translated into English as I Invented Poetry²²:

Paper the Moroccons invented
Letters the Phoenicians
Poetry – I invented

The grave-digger invented the oven,
The oven-controllers made orders for bread
The bread-takes invented the queue
And learned to sing in chorus

²² Afzal Ahmed Syed in Farrukhi and Pritchett, *An Evening of Caged Beasts*, pp1-3

When ants came too and stood in the queue for bread
Hunger was invented.

The mulberry-seller invented the silkworm,
Poetry made dresses for girls out of silk,
For girls dressed in silk, madams invented harems,
Wherever they went, they told of the silkworm.

Distance invented four feet for horses,
Fast movement made the chariot.

But by that time poetry had already invented love.

Love invented the heart,
The heart made tents and boats
And traversed long distances

The palace eunuch invented the fishhook
Stuck it into the sleeping heart
And ran away
To hold the cord with the hook stuck in the heart
The auction was invented
And
Force invented the final bid.

I sold all the poetry and bought fire
And burned up the hand of force.

This is as good an introduction to the poetic world of Afzal Ahmed Syed. However, his technique is at its best in a longer poem from which the title of his first collection of poems was extracted, *Cheeni Hui Tareekh*, called An Arrogated Past in English translation²³:

We survived the massacre
And are now trying
To outwit the targeted killings

We are not worthy yet
To have a frozen death set after our heart
Locked into a sensitive weapon's sight

In the finest hotel of a bustling metropolis
A panel of experts
Is holding a seminar
To find out how we survive ----

The poem reaches its conclusion on the following lines:

The cover of four sandbags
And an arrogated past
Were insufficient
To keep us alive.

Going back to the well-known Faiz poem *Lahoo Kay Suragh*, dated January 1965, there is a history of bearing witness and giving voice to the murder and mayhem afflicted upon

²³ Afzal Ahmed Syed, *Rococo and Other Worlds*, trans. Musharraf Ali Farooqi (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2015), pp 4.

downtrodden and unsung people²⁴. Syed has used a stark diction and is closer to the common man as a victim, betrayed and horror-stricken beyond words. Even more so then when these poems were written, Pakistan has been a target of terrorist attacks and this poem seems to me to capture the quintessential essence of what it means to live in such a situation, unspeakable, denied of a past, tormented and torn by present day problems but nevertheless poetic. I wonder if the world is listening, a question which the entire body of work I have sketched out seems to be asking.

I would like to refer to another poem before I conclude. This tragic note is clear in a number of Afzal Syed's later poems and a poem states:

“History is already turning counterclockwise.“.The poem I would like to mention here is called in this translated version, We Need a Whole Lot of Flowers.²⁵” From its enumeration of painful sites of possible remembrance, the poem ends on a particularly poignant note:

We need a whole lot of flowers
On a whole lot of dancing creepers
That we could train to cover the city.

We do need many books, more and more stories and a whole lot of flowers to cover
the country of many stories.

ENDNOTES

Asad Muhammad Khan is a fiction writer and poet. He was born on September 26, 1932 in the Indian city of Bhopal. He received his early education in Bhopal and had to leave home at an early age. He came to Karachi in 1950 and started his working life with various jobs

²⁴ Faiz Ahmed Faiz, "Lahoo Kay Suragh" in *Nuskha-haiye Wafa: Kuliyaat-e-Faiz* (Lahore: Maktaba-e-Karavaan)

²⁵ Afzal Ahmed Syed, *Rococo and Other Worlds*, pp15-16

and at the same time continuing his education. He obtained his bachelor's degree from the Karachi University but had to abandon plans for further studies. He joined the Karachi Port Trust and served there until his retirement. He started writing poetry in the 1960s, becoming known for his lyrical style. He is at home in both prose and poetry, writing in a variety of styles. His first collection includes both short fiction as well poems, and it was self-published by the writer in 1982. His second collection appeared in 1990, followed by *Ghussay Ki Eik Nai Fasl* came out in 1997. He has published a volume of poetry, three further collections of short fiction as well as a volume of collected stories. His selected stories in English translation came out in 2002 entitled *The Harvest of Anger and Other Stories*.

Hasan Manzar is a fiction writer whose real name is Syed Manzar Hasan. He was born on March 4, 1934 in Hapur, North India. In his boyhood he accompanied his family to Lahore after independence and the partition led to the emergence of Pakistan as a new nation-state. He obtained his degree in medicine from Lahore, going on to post-graduate in psychiatry from the University of Edinburgh. He worked as a physician and psychiatrist in a number of places in Asia and Africa. An early stint of short stories and a novel left incomplete marked his early writing career in Lahore but gradually he stopped publishing, even though he did not completely stop writing. Later on, he decided to settle down in Hyderabad and established a medical practice there. It was in that period that he re-established his links with the literary world with the publication of his first collection *Rehai* in 1981 and the second in 1982, both collections self-published by the author. His latest collection *Khaak Ka Rutba* won an important literary award by the Pakistan Academy of Letters. His first novel *Al-Asifa* was set in the Gulf area and focused on the social upheaval with the discovery of oil. He has since then published five more novels. His unpublished works include a novel, a full-length play, a collection of short stories, two books for children, some verse and essays. He now lives in Karachi.

Ikramullah is a novelist and short story writer. His full name is Ikramullah Chaudhry. He was born in a village in the Jullundhar district of the Punjab in India and received his schooling in the city of Amritsar. With his family, he moved to Pakistan after the partition. He completed his education from Multan and Lahore. He worked for an insurance company

throughout his career, retiring in 1990. He achieved fame and notoriety for the novel *Gurg e Shab* which was banned after its publication in 1978. He has published a number of books since then. A translation of two novellas entitled *Regret*, translated by Faruq Hasan and Muhammad Umar Memon came out as a Penguin Modern Classic from New Delhi in 2015. Never prolific, his literary output is relatively small. He is recently working on his memoir of childhood days in the pre-Partition era. He now lives in Lahore.

Novelist **Mirza Athar Baig** has come to the forefront relatively recently. He was born in Sharakpaur, a small town near Lahore. He received his education from Lahore and became a respectable professor of philosophy at the prestigious Government College, now The Government College University. His literary career started with short fiction and he published several, though he has kept back only a few in his to date single collection. His first novel *Ghulam Bagh* achieved considerable critical acclaim and went on to five editions, an unusual achievement for a serious novel which was also heavy-going in terms of language and themes. His collection of short stories appeared in 2008. His second novel *Sifar Say Aik Tak* appeared in 2010 while the latest is *Hasan Ki Soorat e Haal* was published in 2014. He lives in Lahore.

Azra Abbas is a poet as well as a writer of fiction and memoirs. She was born in Karachi and grew up in a middle-class locality which she has depicted in her memoirs of childhood days. She was educated in Karachi and completed her Masters in Urdu Literature from the Karachi University. She subsequently started teaching at a government college in Karachi. In 1976 she was married to fellow writer and poet Anwer Sen Roy. She attracted the notice of literary circles with her book length prose poem *Neend Ki Musafitain* in 1981, later translated into English as *Voyages of Sleep*. She went to publish a collection of poems in 1988 and again in 1996. She has published four collections to date and is currently working on another one. Her memoir of childhood days has been translated into English as *Kicking Up Dust*. In addition to her poetry, she has published a collection of short stories and a novel. A selection of her poems was included in *An Evening of Caged Beasts*, translated and edited by Asif Farrukhi and Frances Pritchett. Her later poems are discussed in some detail by Asif

Farrukhi in a study included in Nichola Khan's book, *Cityscapes of Violence in Karachi*. Azra Abbas now divides her time between London and Karachi.

Poet and translator **Afzal Ahmed Syed** was born in September 1946 in Ghazipur, North India. He grew up and received his early education in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh now but then the major city in East Pakistan. He witnessed the traumatic period marking the death throes of East Pakistan and the blood-stained birth of Bangladesh. He completed his education in Karachi and Beirut, to be trained as an entomologist and in that capacity he worked for the Government of Pakistan. His first collection of poems *Cheeni Hui Tareekh*, regarded as a landmark collection of modern poetry, appeared in 1984. A collection of poetry in the more traditional form of the ghazal came out in 1986 while his third and fourth books of poetry appeared in 1990 and 2000. He has translated extensively from modern European poets and from classical Persian into Urdu. A selection of his poems was included in *An Evening of Caged Beasts*, translated and edited by Asif Farrukhi and Frances Pritchett. All of his poems have been translated into English by Musharraf Ali Farooqi with the title *Rococo and Other Worlds*, published from New Delhi in 2015.

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